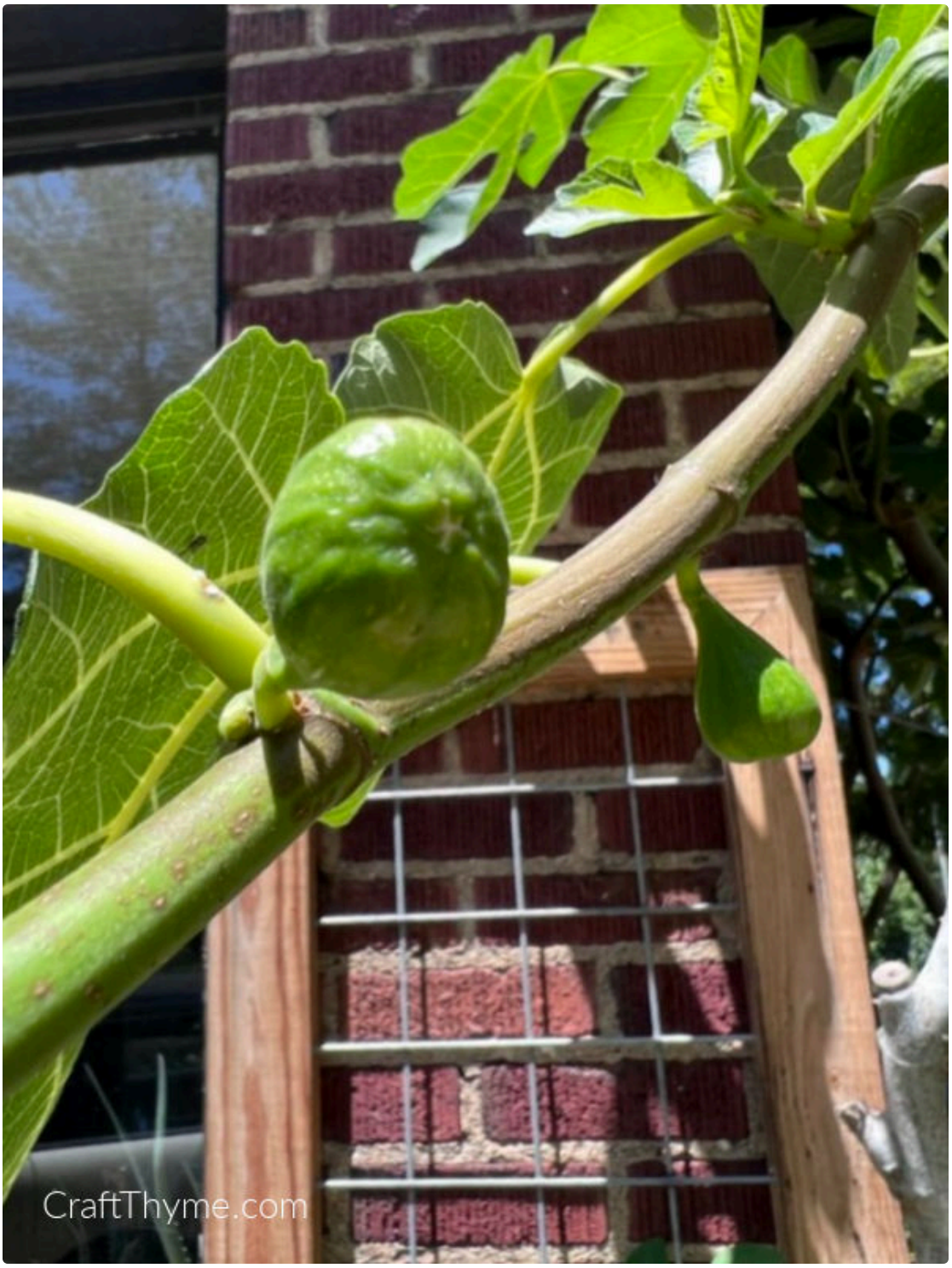
Posted on September 6, 2022 by Brianna – Leave a comment



Can you grow figs in zone 6 or zone 7? Absolutely! I have tips to grow a variety of figs, outdoors, in zone 6 and 7 climates from personal experience. For those of you in even colder (4 & 5) zones I have some techniques to help grow fig trees that are proven to work. For those of you unfamiliar with fresh figs, they are an amazingly sweet, succulent fruit that can be grown on fig plants that are kept as trees, bushes, or espalier. Fresh figs do not ship well, so you may not have a chance to enjoys the nuanced flavor of fresh figs unless you grow them yourself. With a little bit of planning you can have hundreds of fresh figs for drying, canning, baking, jam, and other uses. Let’s jump in to fig growing tips!

In order to keep figs, growing outside in cold climates, you need to look at a few factors, site selection/root preservation, water, pruning, and variety selection. If you live in a climate that is just toooooo cold for figs, don’t worry I have tips/variety selections for pots. Let’s get started:

3 S’s (Site Selection for Figs)

The number one tip for growing figs in zone 6, zone 7, and colder climates is site selection. I keep 3 S’s in mind

- South
- Sunny
- Sandy Soil

Of the three, finding a sunny, south facing location is absolutely key to making a fig happy and the keeping roots survive over the winter. South facing, sunny locations, help to create a warm microclimate that better matches the native, warm climates of Turkey, India, and the Mediterranean. Figs appreciate well-draining soil, but I have found my fig plants do just fine in clay soil too. They do seem to grow a bit slower in super hardpacked clay, but what doesn’t? Just one of the joys of the southern US.

If you want to up your site selection game, it is even better if you can find a sunny, southern location, near a wall. Walls (especially cement, brick, or thick surface) acts as a heatsink. A heatsink, during the winter months, will help regulate heat and keep warmth near the root base of the fig by absorbing the warmth of the sun throughout the day and re-radiating the warmth at night. Preserving the root base is the most **important part of keeping figs in cold climates**. Even if you have a massive cold snap that kills all the limbs, figs can regrow and produce fruit from the root base in a single year.

The oldest fig is sited on a warm southern wall.

Liquid Diet (Water Needs of Figs)

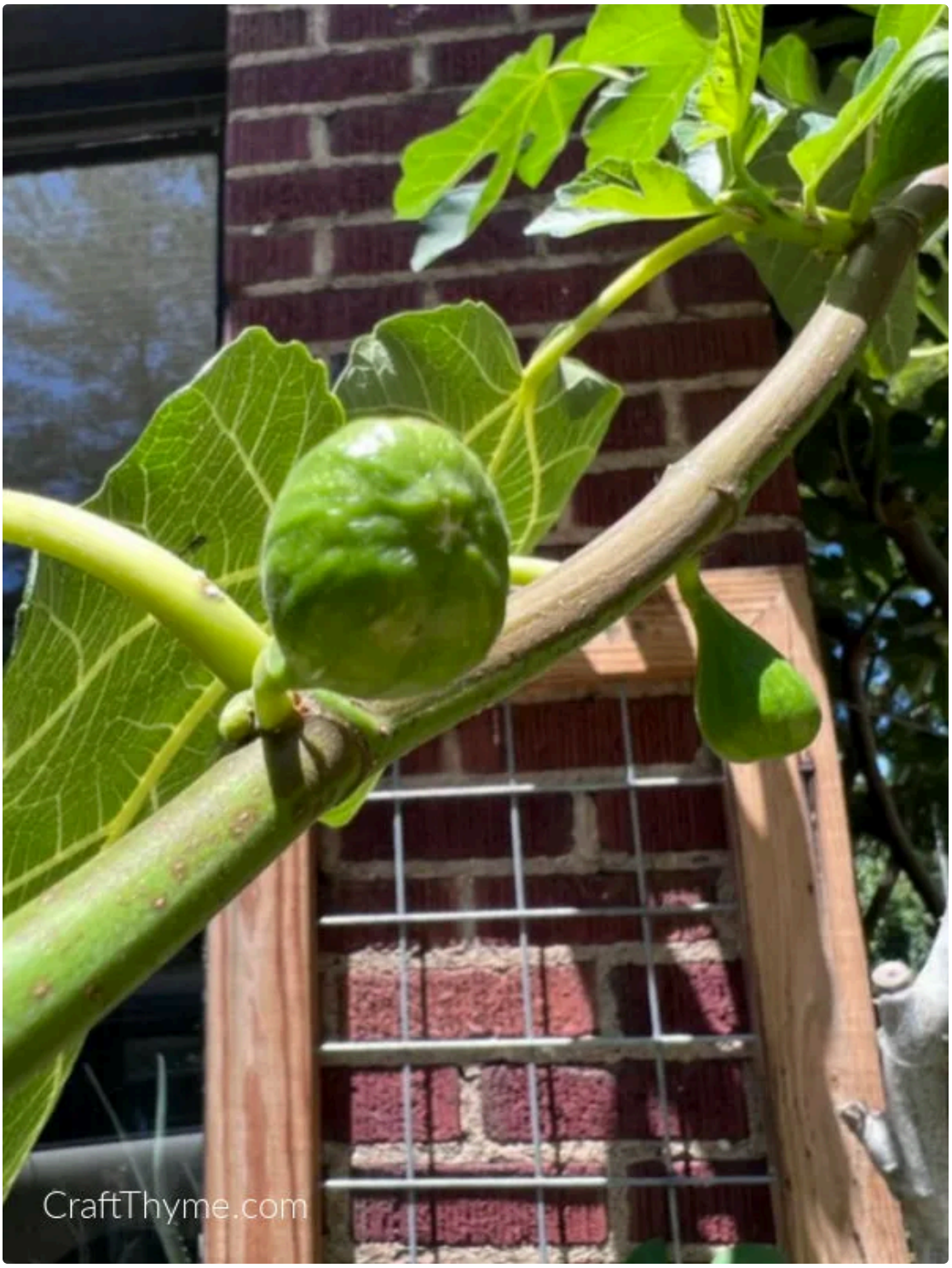
Fresh figs are a plump juicy fruit. In order to make fruit with a high water content, figs, will suck up lots of water. **IMPORTANT**: This does not mean water your figs all the time. Figs are specially adapted to more arid climates. This means, the roots should not be constantly wet, and you also shouldn't plant a fig near your water line… It will seek it out. In growing my figs I do not need supplemental water, unless I am newly establishing a planting. If you live in a wetter zone 5, 6, 7 don't worry. I live in a pretty wet climate, I just made sure that my figs aren't planted in a low lying area where water pools or stays super damp (like behind my garage).

While we are on the topic of diet, Figs do well with only light fertilization. In fact, I have found I am more likely to get giant leaves and less fruit if I give a fig too much nitrogen. So frankly, I don't. Why waste my awesome compost on a tree that does worse with it? If you have poor soil or sandy soil I suggest topping with a good compost each spring. Only add more fertilizer if the growth slows or leaves show signs of nutrient deficiency otherwise like the infomercial "set it and forget it".

Cut Them Out (How to Prune Figs)

Hear me out: Pruning figs is both important and not important all at once. Figs produce two crops a year. The first one (called Breba) grows on the previous year's wood. This harvest is smaller and in early summer. So if you prune all your limbs in the fall, you are not going to get much of a breba crop. However, in my experience the breba crop is not much of anything in cold weather climates. We have variable last frosts, and strangely hot and cold springs in zone 6 & 7 in the mountains. So at most I'm only getting a few figs and would rather have nice tame trees. If you live in a more stable climate then maybe a Breba crop would work better for your figs. In which case, ignore everything I said and very carefully prune old growth in the spring.

The second 'main' crop of figs happens in late summer/early fall on new wood. This means you need to be selective on pruning new growth. That being said, I keep my figs trimmed because I have my main "big boy" right beside the house (well away from my water line :)) and he grows like whoa… I need to be able to walk around him and harvest the figs without climbing a 10ft ladder. Some of my secondary figs I want to keep more as bushes and less tree like, so, I let the roots send up shoots and I top off the branches when they get about head high. One I grow along a wall and trim back the limbs that grow outward. Long story short, trim as you like, but make major cuts when the fig is dormant (all the leaves have been shed). Also, before you go "cleaning out dead wood" in the spring WAIT. Figs, in colder climates, leaf out well after a lot of other plants… I cannot tell you the number of times I have thought limbs were dead and then ended up sprouting leaves.



Main Crop of Baby Figs

Variety is the Spice of Life

Now for my favorite part of this article, varieties adapted for cold weather. Over the years, growers have developed fig varieties that are better suited for colder climates like zone 5, zone 6, and zone 7. Or varieties that do better in containers that could be brought inside in very cold climates. If you do grow in pots you will need a cool location to stash the pots during the winter so they can have a dormant time. I keep mine in an unheated greenhouse. Please note, all varieties listed are self pollinating as most cold climates do not have the necessary fig

wasp for pollination. Now on to the varieties (all Ficus carica), here are a few options below:

Chicago Hardy (Zone 5 (Sheltered),6,7,8,9,10)
The most well known of the cold weather figs, Chicago Hardy was thought to be brought over my immigrants from Sicily, Italy to Chicago, Illinois USA. This brown fig does exceptionally well dying back to the roots and re-growing year after year.

Chicago Hardy Fig (image courtesy of Stark Brothers)

Celeste (Zone 5 (Sheltered),6,7,8,9,10)
Lighter brown/purple fig with sweet flavor. Makes a good bush variety. Does not do quite as well with constant dieback so see the tips/tricks for helping overwinter figs.

Celeste Fig (Courtesy of Restoring Eden)

White Marseilles (Zone 6,7,8,9)
Brought over from France and a favorite of Thomas Jefferson this greenish to yellow fig is sweet and does well outdoors in cold climates. While I purchased a Celeste fig, I am fairly certain this is what I am actually growing as my “big boy”. The fruit stays green and I look for ripeness when they start to hang down. Delicious, these are also good for using in cooking as they won’t darken the color of whatever you are making.

White Marseilles Fig (Image Courtesy of Petals from the Past)

Brown Turkey (Zone 6,7,8,9,10)
We are fairly certain this smaller brown fig is what my mother grows. Supposedly, the fruit is less tasty compared to other varieties. We have not found this to be the case. It produces TONS of small brown figs that make excellent jam or quick bitesized snacks.

Brown Turkey Fig (Image Courtesy of NC State University)

Dr. Monticello (Zone 6,7,8,9)
This fig was brought over from Italy via Dr. Sam Monticello's grandmother when she immigrated to Kansas and Missouri. Supposed to have a richer flavor the Celeste

Dr. Monticello Fig (Image courtesy of Restoring Eden)

Letizia (Zone 6,7,8,9,10)
Amber to Dark brown fig brought over in the early 1900's from Marche region of Italy. It was grown in a semi-protected garden area in Pennsylvania and propagated. Smaller than a Chicago hardy but produces a more solid breba crop. Young trees need more protection until established.

Letizia Fig (Image courtesy of Logee's)

Olympian Fig (Zone 6,7,8,9)

A newer (2014) fig variety discovered in Olympia, Washington, USA. Purple skinned crop known for surving temps down to zero F or (-18 C).

Olympian Fig (Image courtesy of Pixies Gardens)

Violette de Bordeaux/Negronne(Zone 6,7,8,9)
Smaller purple fig with dark purple to red flesh. This is also a fig that does well in containers.

Violette de Bordeaux aka Negronne Fig (image courtesy of Threefold Farm)

Fig Container Varieties

The following aren't great for cold climates but they are all proven/bred specifically to be productive in containers.

Petit Negra/Negri (Zone 7,8,9,10)
Although this one doesn’t do quiet as well in cold, it remains small and does great in containers. With deep purple to black fruit it can be kept small with good production.

Petit Negra Fig (Image courtesy of Our Figs)

Fignomenal (Zone 8,9,10,11)
Why is this one listed? This fig is especially created for containers and indoor growth. In theory you don’t need to let it chill and can just bring it indoors as the weather cools. I am growing this one, but it is my first year, so I cannot comment on production and if it really does well with no chill periods

Fignomenal Fig (Image courtesy of Logee's)

Little Ruby (Zone 7,8,9,10)
Good grower of tiny bitesized red figs. I won't go into all the reviews I read, but it looks like it isn't quite as sweet but does have a deep 'fig' flavor.

Little Ruby Fig (Image courtesy of Fig Boss)

Little Miss Figgy (Zone 7,8,9,10)
This dwarf fig is a great bush type fig. It can be used for ornamental purposes but will also grow small brown figs with red centers in containers.

Little Miss Figgy (Image courtesy of Gardenista)

Extra Tips & Tricks for Growing Figs

Now that we know how to site, prune, care for, and pick a fig variety for our cold climate it is time for a few tips and tricks for making them even more cold resistent in marginal zones like 5, 6, & 7.

- **Mulch**: You will want to layer a good few inches of mulch around the roots in fall. Don't bury them so deep that you run the risk of rot, but three to four inches will act like insulation. I read about folks adding a foot of mulch. Maybe this works in much colder/dryer climates, but for a damp zone 6 you run the risk of essentially composting the roots over the winter.
- **Low Water**: This is incredibly important for container plants. Do not irrigate in-ground figs during the winter. And only water pots sparingly while the fig is dormant. Let the top 2-3 inches go dry before watering again.
- **Ignore all this advice and go full insulation:** In zone 6b and zone 7a with a good south facing site I have never had to do a full on insulation. However, folks have had success keeping figs outdoors as far as zone 2-3 with trenching and/or insulation. I personally, have trouble picturing a great harvest simply due to the length of time it takes to ripen a main crop of figs, but please feel free to educate me in the comments below. Here are two comprehensive tutorials on insulating figs and trenching/burying figs (an old Chicago tradition).

Harvest Time (Harvesting Fig Fruits and Leaves)

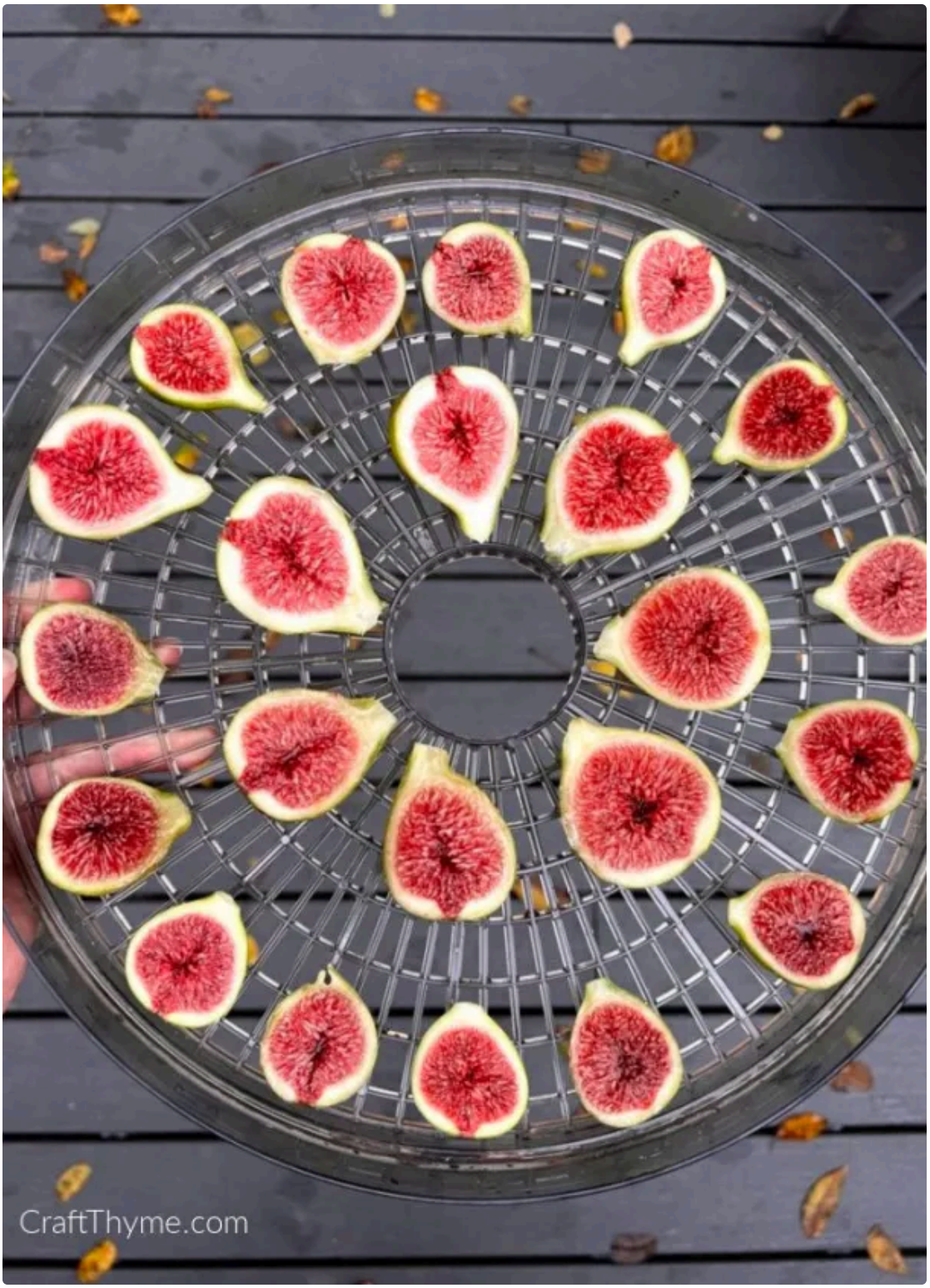
Once you have a fig that is growing for a two to three years you are going to find that you have a LOT of figs. Harvesting is a cinch.

- Ripe Fig Fruit: Depending on the color of fruit you may need to look at a couple of factors to decide on peak ripeness. For green/white fruits I look for when the fruit swells and starts to hang down from the branch. For Brown and Purple fruit you can gauge ripeness by the deep color. In both cases if the fruit looks pretty ripe and it is about to rain pick it! Ripe fruit will split quickly if it rains. Split fruit is immediately attractive to bugs and mold, so, as soon as the fruit splits grab it! Fruits on the counter will last a day or two, you can stretch the lifespan in the fridge a couple more days, but figs need to be eaten or processed pretty quickly.
  - Note: If figs have started to ripen you can bring them in and let the process finish. If they are still green they will NOT finish ripening. I prefer peak ripeness. Lightly press the flesh to see if the fig is 'ripening'. If softer then it has started. If very soft you are probably near/at peak ripeness.
- Fig Leaves: Fig leaves are edible! These can be harvested throughout the growing season. You can easily sun dry them for tea (it makes a nice coconut flavor to tea) or blanch them and use them like grape leaves.
- Green Fruits: Inevitably in cold climates you will be left with green fruit at frost time. You can pick this fruit and use it in recipes.

Preserving the Harvest

Now that you have your ripe fruit, green fruit, or leaves you may want to make it last. I have linked some articles with recipes for preserving/using figs. We LOVE to make ripe fig jam in late summer to tide us through to fall.

- Fig Jam: We used this recipe last year. The flavor was divine but it was a little runny. I might look at adding a tiny bit of pectin or maybe some citrus zest.
- Dried Figs: I love to simply halve my figs and plop them in my handy Ronco food dehydrator (Oh yeah I can't make that shit up) until they are like fig jerky. Here is probably a better way to do it…
- Fig Leaf Tea: When I prune my figs I let the leaves dry in the sun (They dry quickly) and then crush them up to add a coconut/tropical flavor to herbal tea.
- Pickled Green Figs: At the end of the season you will most always have some green figs left over that didn't ripen in colder climates. I am going to try this recipe for pickled green figs right before my first frost.



See I really do dry figs in a Ronco Food Dehydrator

Do you have a favorite type of fig or fig recipe? If so, please share in the comments below: